

sweet dreams by brawlite

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Genre: Angst, Avoiding talking about feelings, Bisexual Steve Harrington, Dreams, Food, Multi, Nightmares, PTSD, Pining, The Upside Down, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, everyone has their own problems and they are there for each other, good friendships, i'm truly sorry steve harrington this is not a nice time for you, jonathan and nancy give support in different ways, self-realization amidst the crippling pressure of anxiety problems, taking care of each other

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Summary:

Steve maybe isn't doing so hot right now. But, besides running from the terror of constant nightmares and shrugging his way through a crippling lack of sleep, he's making do.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

sorry, steve harrington.

When Steve wakes these days, it's always in a cold sweat and gasping for breath. It takes him long minutes to claw his way out of the insidious darkness of his dreams, to brush the lingering ashes away from his thoughts. The chill of his nightmares clings to him like a blanket of fog, unforgiving and unrelenting in the face of reality.

He can barely manage more than a couple hours of sleep now, blinking tired eyes awake into the still darkness of early mornings. It's a rare day when he wakes after sunrise, anymore. He gets ready in the dark, pulling on clothes over muscles sore from nightmares and lack of sleep. He leaves the house before dawn simply because he's awake, because he can.

At least the sunrises over the fields in Hawkins are pretty spectacular.

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Steve takes his coffee black.

It's not out of any steadfast desire to be perceived as more masculine, though he's sure that's how the habit started. No, it's more convenience now than anything else. All he has to do is pour as much coffee as he can possibly fit into his thermos, close the lid, and hightail it out of his house before his parents wake up. Not that they pay him much attention these days; they deemed him old enough to be unsupervised years ago. He operates as a free man now, untethered and unaccountable. They're kind of perfect strangers -- the last thing he wants is to see his parents after clawing his way out of a nightmare. He's not a kid anymore; he doesn't need comfort that they can't give. All Steve wants is to be left alone with his thoughts and with his coffee.

He probably shouldn't spend every morning sitting on the hood of his car watching the sunrise, but knowing better doesn't stop him.

There's no way in hell it's a healthy coping mechanism, secluding himself in the middle of nowhere in a poisoned field with only the bite of the morning air and his trusty car for company, but it's something. It's not like he has anything else, anymore.

Steve used to have Nancy, but now he doesn't.

Well, that's not *entirely* true. They're still friends, they still talk -- how can you *not* after all the things they went through together -- it's just different. Nancy has Jonathan now, because Steve was too busy pretending everything was fine when it wasn't. It's only fair; Nancy should have someone who helps her, who is there for her when she needs it. Not someone who is too chickenshit to be even remotely self-aware.

The hero gets to keep the girl, and Steve is no hero. He's learned that, now.

He's learned that he's a damn good babysitter, though.

Steve smiles and takes a sip of his coffee. It's bitter, but still warm. He watches the quiet pinks of the dawn slide into lively oranges and yellows, painting the Hawkins sky with the watery beginnings of a new day. He could say he doesn't know why he does this, why he drags himself, sleep deprived and cold, out into the middle of a dead field, over and over again, but he does. It's the same reason Nancy Wheeler sleeps with a gun and spends more time with her family, why Jonathan Byers follows his little brother everywhere. It's the same reason Steve always drives himself to Dustin's after his morning ritual and drives the kid to school.

Steve needs this.

He needs the reminder of life, some tether to reality and the mundanity of everything.

He needs the promise that the sun rises again each day. He desperately needs the small comfort that that thought brings him. A small comfort is better than none at all.

He needs the harsh caffeine of oversteeped coffee to keep him awake,

just as he needs the warmth of the sun to remind him that he's alive, that he's in this world and not the one below. Not stuck in the winding, dark tunnels of the Upside Down he sees in his dreams, where he's running and fighting for his life.

Here, in the pastel mornings, he can begin to feel the frost of his nightmares thaw from his bones.

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"All that coffee's not good for you, you know," Nancy greets him, when Steve leans up against the locker next to hers. He used to do this every morning when they were dating. Maybe he should have stopped by now, but it seems like his body never really got the memo: his routine never changed. He still finds himself here, leaning up against a nearby locker all relaxed and slick-like, wishing Nancy good morning. Maybe he's a little further away from her these days -- both literally and figuratively -- but he's still here all the same.

Steve's been up for five hours now, but Nancy still looks more put together than him. Perfectly pressed and gorgeous as always. Whatever. At least his hair is still perfect.

Today, Nancy is wearing a faded jeans and a sweater that looks cozy enough for the weather. Her hair is an artful work of soft curls and her lips are a pale pink. Steve tries not to look at them for too long, but he still can't help but miss her morning kiss.

"A little coffee never killed anyone," Steve says, tipping back the last of his coffee into his mouth. It's cold now, even more bitter than before.

Nancy narrows her eyes. "I'm sure that's not true."

"Enough caffeine can give you a heart attack," Jonathan says, sneaking up behind Steve like he always does. He doesn't go up and give Nancy a kiss like Steve would have, but they do smile softly at each other. Steve isn't sure if the lack of physical affection is in polite deference to him, some sort of consolation prize for drawing the short straw, or what. It's not like he *cares*, but sometimes he wonders.

It wouldn't hurt to see the two of them peck lips once in awhile. It would at least remind Steve that Jonathan and Nancy are both *happy*, and that's all that really matters. That's all Steve wanted out of this.

"Thanks, *mom*," Steve says, at Jonathan. Then, he decides better and looks between the two of them and amends: "*Moms*."

"Steve," Nancy starts, but she doesn't get to finish the thought because the school bell cuts her off. "You just look tired, is all," she says, resigned, once the mass of students start bustling around them for first period.

Steve holds up the thermos and gives it a shake. "That's what the coffee is for, Nance'." He gives her a winning smile, slaps Jonathan on the back, and heads off to his first class.

Behind him, he can hear Nancy's voice, so familiar he could pick it out in any crowd: "He does look tired, doesn't he?" Unfortunately, it's about the third time Steve has heard her say something along those lines in the last month.

"Yeah," Jonathan says, as his voice begins fading into the cacophony of teenagers. It's a pity Steve can pick it out so easily now, too. "He really does."

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Steve sleepily blinks his way through Calculus and then does the same through History. He manages to make it to gym class before the fatigue really hits him hard. It always starts to creep in around the edges by eleven AM, and by eleven-thirty it's always got a full hold on him. It means that a break for exercise actually does him some good, as boring as gym can be.

Dodgeball or basketball are great for working off the sleepiness from under his skin. Even Billy doesn't bother him so much, anymore. He provides just enough animosity and competitive spirit to keep Steve kicking, to push him a little past his limits, but the whole act doesn't seem as malicious as it used to. Like Billy somehow got the bite taken out of him. That's all well and good, because Steve has fought enough monsters in the last year -- he really doesn't need to fight another

anytime soon.

Other than his nightmares, that is. But he's old hat at that fight, by now.

After gym, when he's showered and running high off endorphins again, he starts to feel like himself again. No shadows creeping into the corners of his eyes, no tendrils of darkness coiling in between his thoughts. Just the smell of soap and the promise of a warm cafeteria meal, as good as that can be, anyway.

He doesn't sit with his old friends, anymore. He sits with Nancy. And with Jonathan sometimes, too, when he decides to pry himself out of the darkroom for something to eat. It's not that he doesn't see his old friends at all, that he doesn't keep up appearances of popularity and nonchalance -- he does. But he doesn't have the energy to keep up that act all the time anymore. It's easy in passing, to see them all between classes and after school for short bursts of time. He can be loud and talkative and carefree in those small snapshots of time, unhindered by lingering fatigue or the haunting memories of his nightmares. But it's a routine, one that Steve seems to do effortlessly, without thinking or feeling -- he barely remembers what he says afterwards or who he's talked to. It doesn't really matter, anyway -- none of them are really his friends. They don't *know him*, not like Nancy or Jonathan do. Even if the three of them don't actually *talk* much, it feels better to be around them than anyone else.

Today, Nancy and Jonathan are both already in the cafeteria when Steve shows up, books out and studying like the good students they are.

When he sits down, they close their books. "Don't stop on my account," Steve says, mostly joking, but also because he doesn't really feel much up for talking today. He'd much rather they study through lunch together while he soaks up their company and their comfort in silence. It took Steve a while to realize that being near the two of them, with their shared experiences and trauma, was comforting. For the longest time he'd avoided them both, concerned that they'd just dredge up old memories. Turns out, they do a decent job of burying them, instead.

Now that he feels more tired with each passing day, it's better and better to be around them in any small moments Steve can find.

Steve takes a bite of his sandwich and watches Jonathan look at Nancy, who looks right back at Jonathan and shrugs. Some silent, wordless communication happens between the two of them. Steve can't help but feel a little jealous at the ease of it. He and Nancy were never quite like that.

"If you two lovebirds want me to skedaddle, you gotta let me know. If I'm interrupting something?" Because it kind of seems like he is. Steve keeps his tone light and jovial, because he doesn't want the jealousy creeping through. And he *definitely* doesn't want the fatigue to get in there, either. Somehow, that feels more important, even though it probably shouldn't be.

"No," Nancy says immediately. "That's not it."

"You're fine," Jonathan says. And then: "Stay. We want you here." Because '*you're fine*' isn't exactly a ringing endorsement and Jonathan clearly realized that the moment the words were out of his mouth and Steve bristled at them.

"Alright," Steve drawls, and takes another bite of his sandwich. Neither of them are eating -- maybe they already ate. Regardless, with them both sitting and staring at him, not studying, not eating, it all feels a little like an uneven playing field. An ambush. Steve swallows. "So, how was third period?"

"Steve," Nancy says, choosing clearly to ignore his question and plow ahead in whatever direction she already planned. "We're worried about you."

Steve looks from her worried face to Jonathan's, a little shocked that he sees the other boy looking just as concerned as she does. It's not like Steve thought Jonathan didn't *care* -- they're all friends now, of course they care about each other -- but he just didn't think, well, that he'd care *that much*. Enough to show it on his face, stark and plain, in a way that makes Steve feel a little off-balance. He tells himself it's because he's not used to other guys caring, because that's the easy solution.

"We are," Jonathan echoes, like he even had to say anything at all. Honestly, he looks more distraught than Nancy, and Steve has *no idea* what to do about *that*, either.

"Guys, I'm fine," Steve says with a smile. Sure, he feels a little off-balance because of this ambush and all, but he's running high on endorphins and he's sporting a couple bruises from knocking Billy around on the court. The pain feels pleasant and the energy feels great. He feels *good*. He feels alive. The fatigue, the dreams, the nightmares -- all of it's on the back-burner right now. Hardly bothering him at all.

Jonathan raises his eyebrows. "You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"Or three," Nancy says, voice heavy with concern.

He hasn't, really. Steve can't remember the last time he slept well. Can't remember the last time his sleep wasn't filled to the brim with exhausting nightmares. Can't remember the last time he didn't just give up on sleep before dawn. "Geeze, you both really know how to compliment a fella'." Steve runs a hand through his hair -- he knows it still looks good because he checked it in the mirror in the locker room. At least that part of his life and his image are still together.

"Steve," Nancy tries.

"I'm fine, Nance'," Steve snaps, without really trying to snap at all. He takes a breath, lets it out. "I promise. Just a lot of school work. You know how it is."

"You could study with us after school," Jonathan says, after a beat, after Nancy just stares at Steve like she knows he's lying like a dog. Steve gets the feeling Jonathan knows he's lying too, but at least Jonathan is polite about it, offering him the olive branch of feigned belief. It's kinda nice, if he doesn't think about it too hard.

"Yeah, maybe."

Nancy reaches across the table and rests her hand on his arm. Her hands aren't cold, but they aren't necessarily warm, either. He missed

her touching him. Steve bets that Jonathan's hands are warm, just like Steve's are. "Please, Steve?"

"Maybe tomorrow," he says.

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Tomorrow comes and goes.

On Saturday, Steve wakes up sweating. He's freezing cold and gasping for breath.

The room is dark, because it always is. It's always darker when he closes his eyes, though, when he falls into unconsciousness for the night. He can never stay there for too long, where the air smells like ash and the walls move like snake-like vines. The walls always close in on him from all sides, cloying and claustrophobic.

Some nights he wanders in his dreams, down never-ending tunnels, anxiety on high alert, until his muscles ache. Exploring, choking on his own stale air, eyes squinting in the close darkness as he walks and walks and walks.

Some nights he runs, being chased by dogs with faces that open, with appetites that cannot be sated.

Other nights, he just hides, waiting for consciousness to find him again.

None of the scenarios is particularly preferable over the others, he finds. After experiencing them all over and over again, he can safely say that they all suck.

It's the weekend, but that doesn't stop Steve from getting up at three-thirty, from tugging on fresh clothes and making coffee for his thermos. It doesn't stop him from driving out into the middle of the dead field to watch the sunrise, again, just like every morning before this one.

He doesn't get to see the sunrise, though.

Steve drives to the field in a fugue. He's not sure how he ended up

there other than muscle memory itself. He can barely keep his eyes open as he clammers on top of his hood and leans back against the windshield, facing toward the east. He doesn't even get a chance to take a sip of his coffee, because the next thing he knows, he's back --

Back in the Upside Down.

Steve opens his mouth and gasps, sucking in soggy, ashen air. It smells like rotting, like death. So familiar and so deeply unsettling. He tries to pull his shirt over his nose, to shield his breathing and protect his lungs, but his shirt won't budge. It keeps falling away from him, slipping out of his clumsy hands. He pulls and pulls, finally giving up and ducking his head into his elbow, even though that doesn't really do the trick at all.

Ash settles on his eyelids and he blinks it away, pawing at his face with his free hand. He can't have his vision obstructed. Not here, not now.

Despite his lack of flashlight, everything is eerily illuminated. It's dark, but he can see just barely, just enough that there's no confusion as to where he is.

Faintly, he realizes he's dreaming. He has to be.

There's a certain quality to his dreams that he can't forget. The deep undercurrent of nostalgic fear is part of it, but there's an intangible quality of claustrophobia in Steve's brain's version of the Upside Down. Sure, the real place wasn't a walk in the park: it was close and tight and terrible, but his memories always make it worse, like the tunnels have shrunk in size, like they've been eaten up by time and decay.

Everything feels hungrier here, more malicious and deadly.

He tries to wake up, but that never works. His consciousness refuses to budge, holding him steadfast in the nightmare. It doesn't stop him from trying every time, though.

The cold of the Upside Down starts to seep into him. Steve can't help but shiver.

He listens for a while, stock still and careful, but there's nothing. That's good. He's so *tired*. Exhausted, deep down into the marrow of his bones. Even if there was something chasing him, he's not sure he could run anymore.

That's a lie. He can always run. He always wills the energy from somewhere, in the end.

He'd fight back, but his subconscious never provides him with anything more than his fists and the clothes on his back. A baseball bat would be helpful, but Steve knows that's not what this is about: his fears always seem to win, here.

Steve realizes he's walking before he ever decided to start.

It's not like he's actually going anywhere. In his dreams, all the tunnels look the same. Just an endless labyrinth of squirming vines and putrid air. The ground isn't hard, which is one of the more disconcerting things Steve found about the tunnels of the Upside Down. It was *alive*, cold and squishy and writhing beneath his feet, which gave him the worst case of the heebie-jeebies he'd ever had. His brain capitalizes on that, unfortunately. Sometimes his feet sink down into the fleshy horror that is the floor, like quicksand. Like he's wading through a bog wearing nothing but sneakers. The worst dreams, though, are when he's bare-footed, and he can feel the cold ooze between his toes, when he can feel the vines wrap around flesh and try to pull him under.

A sudden noise pulls him from his thoughts. Everything is muted down here, acoustics muffled by the living walls, so noises carry strangely. He remembers the sound of the dogs and it haunts him nightly, but this -- this sound wasn't that.

There -- again.

Steve picks up a brisk jog, moving in the direction of the sound. It happens again, and this time, it is unmistakable. It's a scream. It's muffled and faint and distorted, but there's absolutely no doubt in his mind: it's definitely a scream.

And it sounds like Nancy.

God, he knows his brain is just playing tricks on him, but he cannot stop the spike of fear that shoots straight through his chest and has him breaking out into a full-out sprint. Even just a dream, he cannot let Nancy suffer alone.

He runs and runs, never drawing closer to the sound. His feet catch on roots and he stumbles, his shoulders catching on errant vines. His lungs become so thick with ash he can barely breathe, barely think. And yet, he still runs, heart hammering loudly in his ears.

He eventually skids to a stop when the tunnels fork. Impatiently, he waits for another sound, unsure of what direction to continue in, but what he gets is: another scream, but not Nancy's. He shouldn't know who it is, who that bellowing yell belongs to, but he does, instantaneously: it's Jonathan.

Jonathan Byers is screaming for his life, and Steve can't do anything but run towards him, kicking off immediately and breaking out into a sprint once again in the direction of the noise. At least he can say this for himself: two years ago, he never knew what kind of person he'd be in the face of danger -- turns out, he's the one running toward the action, instead of away from it. He knows it's probably dumb, but he can't *not* be there for the people he cares about. They went through hell together. He can't just let them go through it alone. He can't *not* stand by their sides, even in the face of idiotic danger. Maybe he's dumb, but at least he is brave.

Even in his dreams, he can't shake his sense of duty to his friends.

Unfortunately, the more he runs, the fainter the screaming gets. Even when he doubles back, panicked and clumsy, the sounds keep fading into the distance, muffled by the writhing darkness. The light is mostly gone, now, giving way only to the lingering cold and dark nothingness of the tunnels.

After a while, Steve is just left panting and alone in the silence again, feeling broken and cold and afraid.

By the time he wakes up, his coffee is cold and the sun is creeping its way toward mid-morning light. His limbs are stiff from sleep and his muscles ache from hours of tense and unending nightmares. The field

sits still and dead around him, unchanged from always.

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Later that day, Steve lets his phone ring and ring, trying not to stare at it out of the corner of his eye. He turns the baseball game up louder on the television, hoping to drown out the noise of his guilt. Sure, it could be anyone trying to reach his out-of-town parents, but he just *knows* it's Nancy, just like he knew the sound of her screams.

Eventually, Steve gives up and takes the phone off the hook, letting whomever calling hit the busy-tone. The *beep-beep-beep*-ing of the phone off the hook is easier to ignore than the angry chime of its ringing, though.

When Steve goes to stretch an hour later, he realizes that, at some point, he's tugged a pillow from the couch into his arms. He's been hugging the thing brutal, pressed tight to his chest, without even noticing it. It's a bit deflated now, crushed from the force of Steve hugging it for an hour. Nancy would probably call that a subconscious cry for affection, and Steve can't really argue that at this point. He'd give anything right now to just hold someone in his arms, to be held by someone back. But he doesn't have anyone to hold or to hold him -- he has friends and a bunch of middle schoolers -- that's it.

"Yikes," he mutters, putting the pillow back where it belongs after giving it a good fluff.

It's fine, Steve thinks. He'll make do. It's not a problem. Eventually, the nightmares will stop and he'll get some actual rest and his life will go back to normal.

Unfortunately, that's totally what he thought last time. And look where that lead him -- wandering through the woods, through the tunnels of the Upside Down, with only a baseball bat to protect himself.

Steve startles when the doorbell rings.

He blames the lack of sleep -- he's not normally an easily spooked

guy. But now, he doesn't really know who he is, anymore. He didn't think he was a run-toward-danger guy, either, but clearly he is. He's just starting to figure this new Steve out. Hopefully he has a chance to shape himself a bit, because he'd really not like to keep some of these things that are haunting him -- like the nightmares. Those, he could do without.

He thinks about ignoring the doorbell when it rings again.

Steve drags himself off the couch, tired muscles protesting all the way. He expects Nancy, or maybe even Dustin, but when he opens the door, it's Jonathan Byers standing on his front stoop, looking anywhere but at the door.

"Uh, hey?" Steve says, a little thrown off balance. On the one hand, he's glad it's *not* Nancy, because now he doesn't feel as guilty for being caught ignoring the phone. On the other hand -- *What?* It's *Jonathan*. Yeah, they're friends, but they don't ever hang out without Nancy between them, her presence moderating the void between two of them. He's never showed up at Steve's house by himself, so naturally Steve wasn't expecting him at all.

He's also not entirely sure what to think about the whole hearing-Jonathan-scream in his nightmare only a couple hours ago. That had been weird, but also strangely not unexpected. So, he just files that away for later and tries not to think about it when he looks at Jonathan's face. His hair is in his eyes, getting shaggier by the day. It's a good look on him, Steve has to admit. Jonathan doesn't need product or spray to look good, not anymore. He's grown into himself in the last couple years -- Steve can't help but notice.

"Hey," Jonathan says. Finally, *finally* he looks at Steve. "Nancy tried calling you..."

God dammit. "God *dammit*," Steve says, running a hand down his face, feeling cornered and caught in his lie, even if that wasn't Byers' intention.

"Um," Jonathan says.

"Come on in," Steve says, stepping back to wave Jonathan inside.

“Sorry,” he says, unsure of exactly what for, but apologizing anyway. Maybe it’s because he’d like an apology back -- for calling, for showing up, for ganging up and cornering him.

“Nancy said you don’t like talking. I mean, about things. About what happened. I know you like *talking*,” Jonathan says.

“Yeah,” Steve says. “You got me. I sure do like talking.” There are always empty spaces to fill. He’s never been ashamed of it before, but somehow, the way Jonathan says it, it’s a close call.

“I don’t mean it like that.”

Steve raises an eyebrow.

“I mean it, Harrington. It’s not -- bad. You talking, I mean.”

Well, that’s a ringing endorsement. Not that Steve cares -- he shouldn’t care. So...why does it feel an awful lot like he does? “Why are you here, Byers?”

“Because Nancy was worried about you.”

Of course: Nancy. Sending Jonathan on her errands because she assumes Steve is avoiding her. Even though he kind of is. Jonathan doesn’t say *‘because I was worried about you,’* which is expected and unsurprising, but also weirdly disappointing. Maybe Steve thought they’d actually give a shit about each other after having gone through hell together. Or, maybe that’s just him.

“You can tell Nancy that I’m fine.”

Jonathan just looks at Steve for a while, studying him. Maybe he’s looking at Steve through the lense of a camera that’s not there, like the artist he is. Trying to find the right angles to see Steve in so that he can see all the cracks, all the poorly constructed walls. Finally, he looks away, looking around the room, instead. Jonathan Byers has never much been one for sustained eye contact.

“Your phone is off the hook,” Jonathan says.

Shit, it is. “Huh, would you look at that,” Steve says. If he

concentrates, he can hear it beeping still, faint and plaintive against the background noise of the television.

“Were you...watching the game?” Jonathan asks.

“Yeah,” Steve says. Mostly, it was just the comfort of something to focus on. He’d had his eyes glued to the television for ages, unfocused and unseeing. He’s not even sure who’s winning. He’s not even sure who’s *playing*.

After a long and heavy moment, filled with silence and static, Byers asks: “Do you want some company?”

It’s not what Steve expected. Jonathan’s been looking like he’s itching to get out of Steve’s house the second he set foot inside. He hardly looks like he wants to settle in and watch some ball. But, when Steve studies his face, he can’t find anything that resembles reluctance there. Just the soft curves of Jonathan’s face forming into a hesitant smile, a little skeptical, but only because he thinks Steve might say ‘no’. Or ‘*maybe another time*’. Which is pretty much all Steve has said to either Nancy or Jonathan for a while now when it comes to long-term company.

He feels divided, split open at the seams. Half of him wants to shove Byers out of his house, to not let him in when Steve is feeling so exhausted and emotionally sore. But the other half of him -- the one that kept the television on for noise, the one that crushed a pillow to his chest for comfort, the one that fell asleep in the field and dreamed of his friends screaming in terror -- that part is much louder. Much more starved.

“Yeah, okay,” Steve says.

He folds himself back into the couch where he’d been sitting before, letting the cold leather warm up to his skin. Jonathan sits down on the other end of the couch, miles and oceans away. The space between them is a gaping and ascetic chasm, but Steve can’t deny that it is strangely warmer with Jonathan here, even though Byers is his normal closed-off self.

Briefly, Steve wonders if Nancy gets to see a different side of him.

One that isn't so guarded, one that isn't so distant. Steve has seen hints of it before, but only when Jonathan's around Nancy. It's one of the reasons Steve knows that they're good together -- Jonathan can give Nancy what she needs: a strong, yet open partner. One who is willing to talk, one who is willing to *be there* for her, regardless of personal discomfort. It's taken Steve a long time to see that Jonathan is that -- the opposite of a pushover, strong and far more emotionally available than Steve. Besides, Nancy could do worse than Jonathan on the looks-front, too. The guy's not bad on the eyes, despite his reputation as a loser.

"Hey," Jonathan says, snapping Steve out of his thoughts.

When Steve looks over at Jonathan, he's looking back, a little concerned. For a moment, Steve wonders if Byers is going to call him out on zoning-out at the wall instead of the TV, but he doesn't. Instead, he asks: "Do you have anything to drink?"

Steve is grateful for the question, honestly. It gives him something to do, something to focus on. Something to pretend to be normal about. "Sure. Do you want pop or water?" He slides off the couch and stretches. "I think my dad's also got some beer, if you want. They're gone for the weekend."

"Pop is fine," Jonathan says. He doesn't follow Steve to the kitchen, but his eyes track Steve on his way out of the room, careful and quiet.

Steve gets them both pop. He'd tried to get drunk a while ago, to knock himself out, but it had only made the nightmares worse and harder to climb his way back out of. He hasn't had much alcohol, since. When he comes back into the family room, Jonathan has moved -- kind of. He's still sitting in the same place at the opposite end of the couch as Steve, but he's kicked his shoes off and his legs are stretched out, feet not too far from where Steve had been sitting. Like he's bridging a gap between them.

Steve hands him the soda and pops open his own.

"Is this fine?" Jonathan asks, nodding at his feet up on the couch.

Steve nods. "Yeah, of course." He smiles, "My parents won't notice or care." They don't notice or care about anything, really. Unless it's their jobs or their social circle. Everything else is just inconsequential.

The space feels a little better with Jonathan closer, even if it's just incidental, just Byers stretching out his legs for his own comfort. The gesture of familiarity makes it warmer, more hospitable. Maybe Steve shouldn't feel so cold and isolated in his own living room, but that's just where he's at these days. It's the new normal, and the strange part is that he's getting used to it. He's not sure what that means.

The game drones on in the background and Steve lets himself drift. He drinks some pop and puts the can down on the coffee table. Jonathan is a silent sturdy shape in the corner of his eye, just quietly breathing and watching the game. He is unmovable in an unoppressive kind of way -- maybe even a bit comforting.

Steve doesn't know how Jonathan manages it all, staying in that house of his after what they went through. He doesn't know how he can stay so strong for Nancy, not when Steve just wants to forget it all. He just wants the darkness to stop haunting him, to stop creeping in at the edges of his reality.

At some point, Steve feels the cold compress of worn leather against his cheek. He feels the softness of the couch pillows beneath his body, curled up into the corner of the couch. He can't hear Jonathan breathing over the sound of the television, but even without looking, Steve knows he's still there, just a short distance away. If Steve wanted to reach out and wrap his fingers around Jonathan's ankle and feel the warmth of his skin there, he could. Like a landline, like an anchor. He doesn't, but the possibility of it settles him anyway. It tugs at his eyelids in a certain kind of soft comfort and pulls him into a deep and dreamless sleep.

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"Yeah," Steve hears as he drifts slowly back into consciousness. Everything is fuzzy and warm around him, dreamlike and hazy but in a good way. Sleepy and sunny in a way he hasn't felt in a very long time. The voice is barely a whisper, but not hard to recognize at all.

“He’s sleeping,” Jonathan whispers.

For a moment, Steve is concerned that he’s talking to Nancy, that she’s there too and they’re both standing only a few feet away, watching him sleep. But when there’s a long pause and Jonathan speaks again, Steve’s brain catches up and realizes he’s on the phone. “I’m sorry, I should have called earlier -- I just didn’t want -- yeah,” Jonathan says, his want unfinished.

Steve keeps his eyes shut, feigning sleep even though consciousness is beginning to creep in around the edges. He doesn’t quite want to face reality, yet. So, he just listens to Jonathan whisper into the phone, his words muffled slightly by the drone of the television. The game has long since ended and there’s something mundane on, maybe news, maybe just the weather.

He is warm and cozy, a wool blanket draped over him, familiar in its cedar-and-detergent smell. It’s from the hall-closet. It takes Steve too long to realize that he had been sleeping just a moment ago, soundly and dreamlessly. When the realization hits him he almost snaps awake completely, surprised. It’s a near thing, but his desire to savor this moment has him keeping his eyes shut tight, his body loose and relaxed on the couch.

It’s so strange to think that he slept without nightmares, that he woke up gradually and calmly, still ensconced in the gentle hold of sleep. He feels *good*, for once. Steve’s not even sure what to do with that feeling.

“Yeah I’m --,” Jonathan says, his back now turned to Steve so that his voice is even fainter, more muffled. “I’m going to stay here for a while. I’ll see you tomorrow? -- Yeah, yeah -- you too.” The phone clicks with the sound of Jonathan hanging up.

Jonathan is going to *stay*. Steve doesn’t know exactly what to do with that information. He knows, from context clues and just plain common sense, that Nancy and Jonathan must have had plans. But Jonathan is breaking them to be here with Steve.

It’s night, now. When Jonathan had come over earlier, it had been mid-afternoon. Now, even with his eyes closed, Steve can tell that the

room is dark around him, lit only by the gentle light of the television.

Suddenly, he feels very strange feigning sleep, like he's somehow lying to Jonathan and Nancy both. Stealing their weekend plans away from him. He begins to stir, like he's waking up -- which he is, to some extent. He stretches and makes a noise, but before he can even open his eyes, he feels the warmth of a steady hand on his shoulder. Jonathan's. "Hey," the familiar voice says. "You should go back to sleep."

No, he shouldn't. Steve should wake up and tell Byers to leave. To thank him for his company and politely escort him out. But, before he can do any of that Jonathan says: "Don't worry, I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere."

And Steve -- well, Steve doesn't really have it in him to argue.

--

When Steve wakes up for the second time that evening, the television is off. There's the sound of his father's record player in the corner of the room, quietly chugging away at something that sounds like The Sex Pistols, which is decidedly not his father's record. Likely, the record player is on for both background noise like the TV, and to keep Jonathan entertained. But it begs the question -- where did Jonathan get the record itself? He didn't bring it with him, and Steve doesn't own it, either.

The question answers itself when Steve pulls himself a bit further into consciousness. With every passing second, he becomes more and more aware of what's going on around him. He hears whispering -- two people this time, not just one. It takes him too long to realize that it's Jonathan *and* Nancy, though that much should have been obvious from the start.

Steve carefully cracks an eye open.

The two of them are sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, playing cards. There's only one lamp on in the whole room, a small reading lamp that they tugged over from next to the couch. It's Steve's mother's lamp, but she never uses it, she's never home.

They're both angled so that they're looking out into the room, eyes on Steve's sleeping form. Not staring, just -- keeping an eye. It's weirdly domestic. Awfully caring. And totally surprising.

Steve has never felt more comfortable in his life.

Nancy must have brought the record when she came, Steve thinks. Maybe it's hers, or maybe Jonathan lent it to her. Maybe she stopped by the Byers house on her way here.

Steve stretches, because he's awake and tired of feigning sleep. He can't pretend forever. Nancy and Jonathan stop whispering. When Steve opens his eyes fully, they're both looking at him, expressions stuck somewhere between fond and guilty.

Maybe they should feel guilty. Maybe Steve should be angry that they're both here, traipsing in on his space, uninvited. But he's not. Right now, he's honestly just glad he slept. Sure, they'll probably want to *talk* -- or at least Nancy will -- but maybe Steve can deter them just a little while longer.

"What time is it?" Steve asks. His voice is scratchy from sleep. He can't believe he slept for so long, that there were no nightmares at all. The creeping dread that always follows waking is nowhere to be found. The dark tendrils of anxiety and fear have faded into the distance. For now, he is un-haunted by everything.

"Um," Jonathan says.

"It's two AM," Nancy answers. Well, the time explains Jonathan's reluctance to answer. It's probably a little weird, staying at someone's house uninvited until the early hours of the morning, watching them sleep instead of just sleeping yourself.

The longer Steve lets the silence linger, the stranger it's going to get. And he has a sudden desire for this whole situation to *not* be strange. He feels comfortable for the first time in forever -- he cannot ignore the sudden and pressing desire for *this* to be the new normal. Just the three of them, doing whatever. He should be mad, he should be annoyed, but all he wants is more of this, and he doesn't really know how to ask.

“Well -- anyone want to go to the diner? I could really go for some pancakes.” Steve asks.

“It’s the middle of the night,” Nancy says, pressing her lips together. In the dim light of the room, she looks beautiful.

“I can drive,” Jonathan says, laying down his hand of cards on the floor.

Nancy looks at the hand and laughs, a soft and familiar sound. It’s the sound of her winning a game, graciously. “Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, okay. It’s two AM -- let’s go to the diner.”

They’ll talk later. Steve knows they will. But for now, there’s the promise of pancakes and being squeezed into a booth with Nancy and Jonathan, and Steve can’t bring himself to worry about that yet.

2. Chapter 2

“Maybe you should keep your face out of the way of people’s fists,” Jonathan tells him.

They are sitting in the empty locker room, skipping out on the first part of lunch.

“Gosh,” Steve says, hissing when Byers presses a cold paper towel to his split lip. The pain of it is raw and beautiful. “Why hadn’t I thought of that?”

Byers works in silence for a little while, mopping the last of the blood off Steve’s face with wet paper towels. He works carefully and meticulously, and Steve knows he’s done this before. For both himself, and his little brother. It’s somewhat painful to remember that Steve himself was complacent in the ostracization and bullying of Jonathan in the past. He’s not proud of it, of who he was before he started to find himself.

But Steve’s rejection of his past self doesn’t change the bruised and broken distance between the two of them. Sure, they are friends. They are connected due to their trauma -- and because of Nancy. But Steve isn’t stupid -- not all the time, anyway. He knows that there are some things he can’t apologize for, some wounds that will always be tender and raw. As much as he *wants* Jonathan to accept him, to *like* him, Steve knows he cannot force it. He cannot overwrite the past -- he can just be better about the future. And maybe, that’ll be enough.

“She hates when you do this, you know,” Jonathan says.

“Do what? I didn’t do anything, Byers.”

Jonathan hums, half amused, half resigned. “Yeah, like you weren’t picking fights with Billy all through gym class. Must’ve been my eyes playing tricks on me.”

“Probably,” Steve says. “You know how Hawkins is with those shared hallucinations.”

Steve doesn't know why he cares so much, why he wants Jonathan to not hate him. It's not really important, in the end, in the grand scheme of things. Soon, Jonathan will be heading off to college with Nancy hot on his heels, and Steve will be stuck here in Hawkins with only a bunch of kids and nightmares to keep him company.

But he *does* care. For whatever reason, he finds it brutally important that both Jonathan and Nancy are a part of his life. That they like him, that they *don't* hate him. Kind of like the way finds it important that they don't see him falling apart.

"Seriously," Jonathan says, leaning back to admire his handiwork. Or perhaps to admire Billy's handiwork. "Why'd you do it? Billy's been pretty docile recently. You had to rile him up *bad* to get him to go to town on your face like this."

"Hey now, I got a few good swings in myself."

"Yeah," Byers says with a sigh after a moment of silence, "you did."

Steve shouldn't feel proud that Jonathan noticed -- but he does anyway. The feeling swells inside him like some traitorous thing. Steve ignores it, mostly. He still lets himself preen a tiny bit though, chest full of screaming pride.

"I just felt like it," Steve says, finally. He figures Jonathan deserves an answer, one that isn't entirely a fabrication. "I felt like we ended it on kind of uneven terms." That *is* true, it's just that it's not necessarily the only reason Steve wanted to get into a fight.

The truth underneath that truth is this: Steve just wanted a little bit of pain, a little bit of a rush. He can't get that easily any more, no more swooping in to steal a kiss from Nancy, no more raucous parties and ill-advised hookups, and no more fighting monsters. So, Steve went with the next best thing: a good old-fashioned fist fight. He's still so tired, so exhausted to the core -- at this point, everything feels numb, like it's a thousand leagues away. Feeling anything is better than feeling nothing, Steve figures. Anything but fear, anyway. He gets enough of that on the nightly to be set for life.

"I can understand that," Byers says. He hands Steve a folded, clean

paper towel, cold and damp. Steve rests it over his eye. Byers studies his face, eyes darting over all of Steve's features.

"Do I make a pretty picture?" Steve asks with a grin, before he can think any better of it. He can't help but always think of Jonathan as an artist. Steve always imagines how Jonathan might see the world -- always trying to find his perfectly framed snapshots. He wonders if he is one now, wonders how Jonathan might capture him in that new camera of his.

Jonathan smiles, once he realizes that Steve's not teasing him maliciously. Jonathan's smile is a soft, careful thing and Steve loves it immediately, knowing that, for once, it's directed at him and nobody else. "You really want me capturing your failure on film?" Byers asks.

"Excuse you. This is not the face of a failure. This is the face of someone who felt Billy Hargrove's nose break under his fist."

"Tell that to your black eye and your split lip, Harrington." Jonathan says, but he's reaching for his camera anyway.

"Where do you want me?" Steve asks, grinning wide. He can feel the exhaustion in his bones, but it's all dull and dim thanks to the adrenaline pumping through his veins. His mouth tastes like blood and the pain is starting to creep in, but he feels *good*. So good.

Jonathan laughs and puts a hand on Steve's arm, halting him in the process of getting up. His hand is warm and steady and Steve can do nothing but sit back down, useless under the gentle press of those fingers. "Just stay there," Jonathan says. "You're perfect where you are."

Yeah, he kinda feels perfect, too.

--

When Steve looks at the picture, later, he sees what Jonathan saw.

In black and white, the scene is remarkably stunning. Steve is straddling the bench in the locker room, face split in multiple places and raw. His shirt is covered in cruel drips of blood, dark against the grey of his shirt. He looks disheveled in an artful way, like Jonathan

managed to capture a perfect moment of human fragility. The pose is effortless, too -- just Steve, loose-limbed and beaten-up in an empty locker room, full of a strange void of negative space. It's all of that, but it's his expression, too. Steve looks giddy, totally cracked-open and a little love-drunk. There's a grin on his face he doesn't remember, and eyes only for the camera.

Detached, Steve thinks he looks beautiful, but he doesn't look like himself at all. He looks naked and bare, even with his clothes on. He looks exhausted but elated, split open at the seams and bleeding his feelings everywhere.

Totally exposed and partially broken. But happy, so happy.

Steve can't look at the picture for too long at all.

He keeps it because he doesn't want to give it back to Jonathan, doesn't even want to *talk* to Jonathan after looking at the picture. Objectively, he knows it's not the only copy. That Jonathan could make hundreds more if he so chose -- but Steve keeps it anyway. One fewer is one fewer.

Objectively, he knows it's just a snapshot, taken at just the wrong moment. Steve doesn't always look like that. Doesn't always look that way at Jonathan.

He's not really sure what he sees on his own face in that captured moment, but he knows it has his heart pounding and his head spinning. It's strange. And weird. And he can't bring himself to dwell on it for too long.

Steve'll figure it out when he's had more sleep, he decides.

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"Steve," Nancy says, a day later, when the bruising is worse. Steve is feeling worse, too. Probably because the adrenaline rush is long gone and the pain isn't so sharp and beautiful anymore, just the dull throb of boring bruising. "Your *face*," she says.

"Nance," Steve echoes back, taking a bite from his apple, pretending like the juice that drips onto his lip doesn't sting when it creeps

under his scab.

The cafeteria is chaotic around them like it always is. But with Nancy and Jonathan here to focus on, Steve lets it all fade into the dull roar of background noise. Ignorable and unimportant when he has something else to center himself on. Deafening, when he doesn't.

"We're studying later today," Jonathan says, apropos of nothing. "Do you want to come?"

Steve narrows his eyes. "And be a third wheel?" he says, mouth full. "Yeah, no thanks."

"No," Nancy says. Clearly she hadn't thought of inviting Steve, because she also looked a little surprised at Jonathan's words, but she catches up to whatever game Jonathan is playing, quick. "You won't be a third wheel. We're *studying*."

Like Steve doesn't remember studying with Nancy and how those nights ended. He feels his body flush with the memory, chest heating up on the inside. He hopes it doesn't show on his face -- lucky for him, Steve Harrington has never been a huge blusher.

"Yeah, *and*?" Steve asks with raised eyebrows.

"Just studying," Nancy says, firm. Jonathan nods next to her, like he isn't bothered at all by Steve swooping in to crash their alone time.

"Maybe for a little bit," Steve says, taking another large bite of his apple. It's green and bitter and it's enough to focus on, too, now that his thoughts are feeling jumbled again.

--

Steve convinces himself to skip out on studying with Nancy and Jonathan. They're going to Jonathan's house and Steve doesn't really have much of an interest in going back there, to where he saw something claw its way out of a wall, to where the demo-dog attacked.

But somehow, he ends up there anyway.

"I really appreciate it," Dustin tells him, gathering up his stuff from the front seat of Steve's car.

"Why am I your chauffeur, again?" Steve asks, like somehow the answer will explain why he's at the beck and call of children these days.

"Because the science project was too big to carry on a bike. Will you help bring it inside?" Dustin asks, all grins at making Steve do his dirty work.

Which is how Steve ends up in the Byers' kitchen, arms full of some weird tarp-covered science project that smells like sulfur and vinegar (apparently it's *not* a volcano, no matter how many times Steve asks). It's also how Steve gets trapped there, because just as he's going to put the thing down on the kitchen table for the kids to work on, Nancy walks into the kitchen to get something to drink.

"Steve?" Her eyes light up in surprise and she grins. "Oh, I didn't think you were going to come!"

I wasn't, Steve can't bring himself to say, especially to her face. He wants to tell her that he was just stopping by, *hello & goodbye* and all that jazz, but he just can't. He's too tired, too exhausted. And the house doesn't feel *that bad* anyway, now that he's inside. And Nancy's face is just too happy, too genuinely pleased, to disappoint. "Yeah -- surprise," he says. "Where, um...Where do you want me?"

Nancy raises her eyebrows. "Where are your books?"

Oh, yeah, those. "Still in the car. My hands were full," he gestures to the table. At least he has a solid excuse as to why he's here totally unprepared.

"Go get them, then, and meet us in Jonathan's room," Nancy says. "I'll grab you a drink."

Half an hour later, Steve finds himself sprawled across Byers' worn bedroom carpet, textbooks open in front of him. They all have juice and cookies -- some knock-off brand of Oreos, but they're still good, maybe even better than the real thing -- and Steve actually finds

himself enjoying the moment immensely. Nancy and Jonathan are quiet, just like Steve expected them to be, but there's the muffled sound of the kids in the kitchen, working on their project. Shouts and laughs and excited chatter. It's nice background noise, Steve thinks. There's something homey about the Byers' place; it's lived-in and warm. It's not at all how Steve imagined it, or how he sees it sometimes in his dreams.

For a while, Steve works on History. He does his English reading, too, but Jonathan's room is slightly on this side of too warm and his eyes keep drooping.

Steve fights the drowsiness for a while but he's so honest-to-god comfortable on the floor that he doesn't necessarily *want* to. Eventually, he says a quiet *fuck it* and pillows his head on his arm and lets his eyes fall closed.

He wakes up again a little while later from a dreamless sleep. He's got a crick in his neck the size of Texas, but he actually feels better rested. Steve yawns and stretches, pushing himself up to a sitting position to blink around at the room around him. The light of the room is dimmer -- the sun's almost set and there's only one lamp on in the corner.

Jonathan and Nancy are still studying. They're not cuddling like Steve thought they might be, but Nancy's got one leg stretched out, her socked foot pressed against Jonathan's thigh. Jonathan's hand rests over it -- probably warm and comforting. Jonathan is an outwardly quiet guy, but he's sturdy and solid when it comes down to it -- he's probably a great anchor for Nancy, someone she can lean on whenever she needs to. Steve is glad she has that, now. He really is.

They don't move or look over when Steve sits himself up. Eyes glued to their books.

"How can you guys even read in this light?" Steve asks to break the silence, stretching his hands above his head again, enjoying the way his neck and back crack with the movement. He arches into the stretch with a groan and yawns, tugging off his jacket because by now he's really quite warm.

When he finishes, they're both just *looking* at him. It's a little disconcerting really, especially considering they seemed to be steadfastly ignoring him just a minute ago. Probably trying not to make him feel embarrassed about falling asleep. Which -- was kind of nice, actually. Steve appreciates it.

Steve coughs when they don't say anything, still.

Nancy flushes. Jonathan looks away, and then back down to his book. "Sorry, we didn't want to disturb you," Nancy says.

"I think I'm the one who should apologize," Steve says. "I didn't mean to fall asleep while we were supposed to be studying." He's starting to feel a little embarrassed, really, that he can't seem to keep it together around these two. He drags a hand over his face at the thought and hides the guilty gesture with another yawn.

"No, Steve, it's fine," Nancy says. She leans over and puts a hand on his knee. Steve watches her, half mesmerized. It's like they form one long line of connection: Jonathan touching Nancy, who is touching Steve. If there was an electric current, it would flow through all of them -- he can almost feel it now, hot and buzzing just underneath his skin.

Steve shrugs, aiming for easy-going. "Still," he says. "What would everyone think, me falling asleep in Byers' bedroom?" He's half kidding, but it ends up coming out far more seriously than he intended.

It's not that Steve actually cares, but his mouth says the words, anyway. He could care less, actually. That couple hour nap was better sleep than he gets in his own bed, which is probably not good at all -- but that's just the reality of his life right now. Besides -- Steve doesn't really care about his reputation anymore. Nothing really *matters* after you face bloodthirsty inter-dimensional creatures. Popularity is all well and good, and Steve does keep up some appearances, but if it were all taken from him? Well, he wouldn't find himself caring much at all.

But he *does* care about Nancy and Jonathan. He cares about them both a hell of a lot, and he wants the best for them, wants them to be

happy. And the thought that Steve might jeopardize that somehow...well, it irks.

"I don't care about that," Jonathan says. Of course he doesn't, though. He's a loner by nature -- he doesn't give a shit what the rumor-mill at school says about him.

Steve snorts. "Maybe you should." Steve nods at Nancy. "You don't want anyone thinking she's just a cover, or anything. A *beard*, isn't that the word?" Steve feels a bit like a cat with his fur being rubbed the wrong way, except he's the one doing it to himself with thoughts that just won't quit. His brain is just jumping around, making these connections -- keyed up and anxious and rattled.

Nancy rolls her eyes. "Steve," she says, chiding but weirdly fond. Not as annoyed as she should be that he's saying these things.

"I also don't care about that," Jonathan says.

"Neither do I," Nancy says.

"If they want to think I'm with you instead of her, then they will. It doesn't bother me," Jonathan says.

Steve wrinkles his nose. It *should* bother Jonathan, though, shouldn't it? He should want no one to question his relationship with Nancy. He should want everything to go smoothly. They both deserve that, after all they've been through.

Steve isn't sure why he's suddenly so worked up about this, but he kind of *is*, when he actually thinks about it. He's *bothered*, a deep buzzing underneath his skin. On one hand, it's kind of nice, being bothered by something that isn't nightmares. But it's also not his problem. It doesn't *matter* if people think he's with Jonathan, because he's not. He's not even sure why the thought occurred to him in the first place, other than just as a kind-of joke.

"It's your funeral," Steve says. "But you probably should care more."

"Maybe you should care less," Jonathan suggests, going back to his books.

The problem more so is: why does Steve really care *at all*?

--

The sunrise the next day is beautiful. It's one of those bitter winter dawns that threads through the layered clouds like a veritable rainbow. Saturated light glows on the still snow-covered trees from a snowfall a few days previous. The field itself is dusted in the white powdery stuff and it glows, too. It's easy to pretend for a little while that this is a normal field, that it isn't poisoned and dead underneath the pristine white.

It's cold, but the biting feeling of it is enough to keep Steve awake, to keep his heart pounding heavy in his chest. The wind isn't bad, the way it whips over the field and creates small cyclones of powdery snow.

For one brief and painful moment, Steve wishes he could share this moment with Nancy. Hell, he wishes he could share it with Jonathan, too. They could all sit on the hood of Steve's Bimmer and watch the sunrise. Nancy and Jonathan could hold hands and Steve could drink his coffee to stay warm. It wouldn't be perfect, but Steve doesn't even know what perfection would be, at this point. He just wants normalcy, he just wants sleep.

--

Steve spends the next week's free time around people he hates.

Status-quo, and all that. He thinks maybe it'll help, trying to reset to normal. Not that it did before, but what's the harm in trying again?

He plays basketball until he's stumbling and his muscles are sore. He hangs out after school with people who have nothing to say, who like laughing at all of Billy's terrible jokes. He goes to two parties with beer he can't even palate. He ends up tired, so tired.

Screw the status-quo, Steve thinks, driving his car around in the middle of the night. He ends up back at the dead field, because where else is there to go? It's lightly snowing, so Steve stays in his car. He throws the seat back, though, and lets himself drift in the darkness

above this poisoned place.

The nightmares come slowly this time, reaching up like tendrils, grabbing hold of his limbs like vices, like vines. He feels trapped and alone in the darkness. It is thick and coiling around him, deadly and ashen. He's stuck. Captured. Eventually, he can barely breathe, barely think, until --

Knock knock --

Steve's eyes snap open and he startles at a light shining in through the darkness of the Upside Down. It's *so bright*. He is disoriented and stuck, suffocating. He pulls at his tether until he realizes that it's his seatbelt, that his legs are only caged because they're in the wheel-well of his car, the steering wheel caging him in. The ash he sees falling outside is just snow -- just snow.

The knocking comes again, this time from the window of his car, where that light is. Steve wrenches open the door and the cold comes in, hitting him like a welcome wall of a storm.

Reality spikes more fully as he wrestles himself out of the seat belt.

Chief Hopper is there with his flashlight, peering down at Steve like a disgruntled father.

"So, I got a call about kids screwing around in a car on this here field," Hopper starts. "Imagine my surprise when I find you here napping alone, instead of fooling around."

"Uh," Steve says.

Hopper shines the flashlight around in Steve's car, presumably looking for drugs or alcohol, or anything else to explain why Steve is here in the middle of the night. Maybe even a shovel, or something. There's nothing there to explain himself, other than the bags under his eyes and his own ragged and panicked breathing.

"You okay, kid?" Hopper asks, because Steve looks a wreck. He doesn't need a mirror to know that, doesn't need Hopper to comment on it -- it's all there in the cop's look, the way he frowns down at Steve's face.

“Sure,” Steve says.

“Uh huh,” Hopper says and sticks his hand out. “Keys, Harrington. You can come get your car in the morning. You need to sleep. And you need to eat.”

For a moment, Steve balks, unsure of where Hopper wants to take him. Steve doesn’t want to go home to an empty house, but he also doesn’t want to spend a night in the Hawkins drunk-tank, sleeping it off with a bunch of hooligans. “Where?” Steve asks, too tired to argue.

“I’ve got a couch,” the Chief says after a moment, helping Steve stumble out of his car. His limbs are stiff from cold and sleep. The ground crunches underneath his feet, nothing like the squelching slime of the Upside Down. It’s nice -- or it would be, if his toes weren’t so cold. “And I’ve got eggos for breakfast, if you’re into that kind of calorie-intake in the morning.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve says.

He folds himself into the passenger side of Hopper’s truck and lets himself be driven to a house he’s never been to before.

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“You know you can’t tell anyone about this place, right?” Hopper says, throwing a pile of blankets on the couch for Steve. Steve nods. “Good,” Hopper says. “Now get some sleep. You look like you’re dying.” He flicks the overhead light off, but there’s a nightlight in the corner, burning happily away behind a pane of blue-glass. It’s the exact color of Nancy’s eyes.

It’s the last thing he remembers before he falls asleep.

--

“Wake up,” a voice says, pulling Steve from the dark depths of unconsciousness. The voice is light, yet demanding, calm and authoritative. Kind of like Hopper, but small. Feminine. Even though they haven’t spent too much time together, Steve knows that Eleven is the owner of the voice before he opens his eyes.

"Five more minutes," he says, pulling the old and dusty quilt over his eyes. The quilt is yanked back down only moments later. Steve gets the impression that it's a thing Eleven did with her mind and not with her hands.

When he finally opens his eyes and lets himself focus on her, his suspicions are confirmed. She's holding a glass of milk in both of her hands, standing about a foot away from the couch, staring down at Steve like he's taking up space. So much for a gracious host.

"Alright, I'm up, I'm up."

"We can't eat the Triple-Decker Eggo Extravaganza until you sit down," she says, turning to eye the table where Steve can see three plates stacked high with eggos and whipped cream. Yikes -- that's a lot of sugar for the morning. It looks amazing, though. Like the kind of thing Steve hasn't indulged in since he was a kid.

"Look who finally woke up," Hopper says, walking in from outside. He brings in the smell of cigarette smoke and the crisp scent of winter.

"What time is it?" Steve asks, getting up and stretching. Eleven is already at the table, watching him like a hawk as he stands and shuffles his way over. When Steve sits, she turns her gaze on Hopper, who also sits. The second his ass touches the chair, she starts in on her waffles, ravenous. It's kind of cute. Well, it is cute, but it's also menacing, considering Steve knows just how deadly she can be.

"It's about ten-thirty," the Chief says.

Steve groans. "Ugh, *school*." Well, there's another detention for him for skipping out.

"I called. Told them I was borrowing you for a project. You're off the hook today."

Oh. "You're a lifesaver, Chief," Steve says, around a bite of Eggo-Extravaganza. It's way too sweet, but it's also sort of perfect, too. It tastes like a sugary-sweet sunrise, like waking up to a new day.

"You going to tell me why you were snoozing in that godforsaken

field last night?" Hopper asks. Steve's eyes dart to Eleven, but she's either not paying attention or pretending not to for the sake of common courtesy. Steve isn't sure where she is on the manners-front, but he thinks it's mostly that she probably just doesn't care.

Steve shrugs. "Couldn't sleep. Wanted to take a drive."

"Do you go there often?"

Steve rolls his shoulders again.

Before he can lie, Hopper saves him the trouble. "The dirt's pretty packed-down there, now. Like someone keeps taking the same path every day with their car. Maybe one of the locals wondering what all the fuss was about a while ago, don't you reckon?"

Steve just nods. Yeah, not like Steve drives out there every morning, or nothing. Not like Hopper hasn't figured that out.

"You know they're trespassing on private property, don't you, kid?"

"Yessir," Steve says. Not like anyone wants that field back, though. Nothing will grow on it for years, he bets. Maybe not ever again.

They eat their sugary-sweet waffles in silence for a while. Just the sound of the television droning on in the background and the sound of birds outside. Steve thinks Hopper is being awful kind about the whole thing. He could arrest Steve for trespassing, or even tell his parents. Instead, he let Steve sleep on his couch and made him breakfast in the morning. Well, '*make*' is maybe a strong word -- Hopper threw together some toasted waffles and some whipped cream and called it a delicacy. It kind of *is* thought. Steve feels like he's treating himself after a good night's sleep. Sure, he's still exhausted, but he feels like he's one step closer to crawling back toward normalcy, now.

When Hopper gives Steve a ride back to the field to pick up his car, Steve sits silent in the passenger seat of the Chief's car. Steve had bid farewell to El before they left, promising to drop off a letter for Mike and greetings for the rest of the kids. So, now it's just Hopper and him on the flat roads of Indiana, trundling their way back to a field

Steve can't seem to leave alone.

Even full of sugary waffles, it makes Steve feel cold.

"You know, if you were handling this whole thing well, I'd be worried," Hopper says.

Steve tears his eyes away from the window, away from the trees and the fields and the houses that slide past. "Uh," he says, unsure exactly how he's supposed to respond to that.

"I'm just saying, kid. It's alright to be messed up. You've got nightmares, right? I was down there, *I know*," Hopper says. "How can you *not*?" And, well, Steve can't really argue that at all.

"It's a pretty messed up place," Steve says. His voice sounds far away from him, like his soul is trying to distance himself from his body. But here, in the warmth of Hopper's car moving at a decent clip through familiar roads? Steve feels some modicum of peace. A safety net.

"You can say that again." Hopper lights up a cigarette and offers one to Steve. Steve finds himself taking it, if only because it's something to do with his hands. "I'm real proud of all you did, Harrington. I wasn't nearly that brave at your age. Hell, I could barely look out for myself -- and here you are, shepherding around a pack of kids and fighting monsters."

Steve swallows. He doesn't feel like he's looking out for himself, though. Sure, he's looking out for the kids because someone has to, but that's all he can manage at the moment. There are important things slipping through the cracks -- and pretty much all of them have to do with Steve. But it's *easier* to focus on the kids. He knows how to do that, how to cart them from place to place, how to be some weird cool older brother figure. What he doesn't know how to do is sleep alone or how not to pretend like everything's fine when it's not.

"Thanks," Steve says, because it feels right, even though Steve knows there's a '*but*' hanging unsaid at the end of the Chief's words.

"But," Hopper says -- yep, and there it is. "You don't have to be some pillar of strength all the time. You're allowed to be messed up. You're allowed to not be able to sleep. Hell, I don't think I'd be able to sleep at all without El in the house." Hopper sighs, blowing smoke out of his nose. "You can't just keep all that shit bottled up, though. It'll eat you up inside."

Oh. Well -- that's exactly how Steve feels, actually. Like his anxiety and his fear and his memories are all consuming him from inside, out. Like his fatigue is slowly eating away at everything he is, everything he could be.

"I'm not saying it has to be me," Hopper says. "Hell, I'm not even saying it has to be an adult. But you gotta talk to someone, Harrington. Before you fall down on your feet."

"Yeah," Steve says, feeling hollow and brittle, but somehow a little more anchored than before. Most of Steve's weight is resting against the door of Hopper's car, but for once Steve feels like he doesn't necessarily need the support. Just admitting he's not doing so hot, even silently, is an invisible weight off his shoulders.

For a while, Steve loses him in the washed-out landscape of snowy Hawkins, in the taste of his own cigarette. He feels less like he's idly drifting at the moment, more like he's actually got a destination, even if it's just to pick up his car.

"Jonathan," Hopper says, after a moment. Thoughtful.

Steve snaps to attention, away from the watercolor landscape, away from drifting thoughts. "Huh?"

"You could talk to Jonathan. He's a caring guy, even if he's pretty quiet about it. Even after that row you two got yourselves into, I'm pretty sure he doesn't hate your guts."

"Wow, that's a real ringing endorsement there, Chief."

"I'm serious, kid. I've heard him talking to his girl about you. They seemed worried. Seems like you've got some friends looking out for you, even if you don't know it."

Steve's eyebrows furrow, puzzled. "You heard Jonathan talking about me with Nancy?" Steve isn't *surprised*, necessarily -- just -- he never thought he'd come up between Jonathan and Nancy while he wasn't actively around. Especially in a setting for someone like Hopper to hear -- but then again, Hopper's been spending a lot of time around the Byers residence, so he's got ears everywhere, apparently.

Hopper hums, then shrugs. "None of my business, honestly. Just consider talking to either of them, would you?"

"Yeah, alright."

--

Hopper watches him drive away from the warmth of his cruiser, a single blip on the radar of an empty and deserted field. As Steve watches Hopper's car retreat into the distance in his rear-view, he wonders why Hopper saw him off, why Hopper even bothered at all. Sure, Steve might've stuck around the field just to hang out, but that's really none of the Chief's business. And it's not like he *actually* cares about Steve and his nightmares, right?

Steve's windshield is covered in frozen dew and his steering-wheel is ice-cold under his hands. Steve bummed another cigarette from Hopper for the ride home, but he finds himself tossing it out the window a couple minutes into the drive, unwanted and unnecessary.

Instead, Steve worries at his lips with his teeth. He only had one cup of coffee this morning, but he's actually decently rested, thanks to his snooze on Hopper's couch, rude awakening notwithstanding. But he's not used to the lack of too-much-coffee and his body isn't sure what to do without the incessant vibrating feeling the caffeine gives him. It leaves Steve feeling empty and a little hollow, like he hasn't had quite enough to eat. Like he's a bit more tethered to reality than normal.

It's not too unpleasant, but it is unfamiliar.

He ends up going back home. His house is empty and quiet, his parents both out of town on business. They're gone more often than they're home -- but Steve would probably do the same, if he was

gifted the opportunity to leave Hawkins on the weekly.

But that's maybe not quite true.

Two years ago, all he wanted to do was leave this place. Steve'd had a *plan*. He'd get married, move to the big city -- or the suburbs outside of it -- and he'd have kids and a wife and a happy life. Now, the idea of complacent normalcy seems so strange and bizarre, he's not sure he could handle it. Hawkins is by far the most interesting place on the planet -- and maybe the most dangerous, too. And he has *friends* here, and responsibilities -- he could never leave them unprotected, unguarded.

Besides -- if he left, he'd be taking the secret with him, which just feels wrong. It feels like something that should be kept close to Hawkins, close to the heart.

Steve takes the rest of the day to himself. He fixes up a grilled cheese for lunch, watches boring television on the couch with a soda for a few hours, and then hops in his car and drives to the middle school to pick up Dustin.

Idling outside the school, he spots Jonathan waiting to pick up Will. Steve catches his eye and raises a hand in greeting, accompanied by a soft smile. Byers looks a bit startled when Steve decides to slide out of his car and mosey on over, but not altogether displeased -- they usually have the buffer of Nancy in between them to excuse their interactions. Or a black eye. Something easy to smooth over the jagged edges between them.

But they don't *have* to have Nancy between them, Steve thinks. They can be friends all on their own. After all, Jonathan helped patch him up after Billy rearranged his face recently, right?

"You alright?" Jonathan asks, before Steve can even say hello.

"Yeah?" Steve says, because he's not sure why he *wouldn't be*.

Jonathan makes a face like the root of his question is obvious: "You weren't in school today."

Oh. That -- well, that comes as a bit of a surprise. Steve didn't think

Jonathan would even notice Steve being gone, much less worry enough to ask. There's something about it that warms the gooey eggo-filled inside of Steve's chest, leaving him feeling a little antsy on his feet and too-warm in his jacket. His skin *itches* suddenly, like he's grown too big for it.

"Oh, yeah," Steve says, aiming for nonchalance. He hopes he makes it somewhere close, but knows he probably doesn't. "I ditched."

Jonathan studies his face for a moment and then asks, "Did you get some sleep?"

The words catch Steve off guard. He answers a "yeah," before he can think better of it, before he can decide to laugh that question off.

But before Steve can truly second guess himself, Jonathan just smiles. Casual and fond. Last year, Steve would never have gotten a look like that from Jonathan. Last year, Steve wouldn't've even cared.

"Good," Jonathan says. "You look better for it."

Steve falters. He becomes painfully aware of his own heartbeat in his chest, loud and thudding in his ears. Sure, it's cold enough outside that he can see his breath coming out in a cloud in front of him, but he's suddenly boiling and over-aware of his own discomfort.

He feels a little like he tripped, like he missed a step and stumbled over a crack in the pavement and is now flailing about for anything to hold onto for purchase. Unfortunately, Jonathan's the only thing there for Steve to metaphorically grab onto.

His eyes catch Steve and don't let go -- it should feel weird, staring at Jonathan for so long, but it doesn't. It just -- doesn't.

After a little while -- way too long -- Steve says a quiet '*thanks*' and Dustin and Will show up.

On the way home in the car, Steve lets Dustin ramble about some new science fiction movie he wants to watch -- that he wants to drag Steve with him to watch, no less. It sounds dumb, but kind of fun. Because of this, because of all of it, Steve feels warmer and more human than he has in a long while.

After a nice lull in the conversation, Steve finds himself saying, "So, I've been having nightmares." Like it's easy, like it's nothing. It's so *much*, but he doesn't know how to explain that to Dustin. To *anyone*. It all just sucks, but still saying it takes an immediate weight off, somehow.

Dustin just nod -- Steve can see him out of the corner of his eye. "Yeah, man. We all do. It'd be weird if you didn't. Like some psychopath."

"They're --"

"So bad you can't sleep?" Dustin says, interrupting him.

Steve nods, eyes on the road.

"Yeah, you kinda look like a zombie," Dustin says.

"Thanks."

Dustin is quiet for a moment, clearly trying to think about what to say. "Look man, it sucks," he says finally. "But we're all in this together, you know? When I can't sleep, I go over to Lucas' house and we stay up all night playing board games. And then we crash out when the sun comes up and sleep until his parents get his little sister to yell at us."

Steve huffs out a laugh, imagining just that. It's not hard to picture, and it brings a solid grin to his face, warming the chill that came about with bringing up his nightmares.

"I mean, you could do that," Dustin says.

"I'm not having a sleepover with you, Henderson."

"Not me, you absolute idiot," Dustin says, slapping Steve on the arm. "With *your* friends. Jonathan and Nancy?"

"That's -- not how sleepovers work when you get older," Steve says, as appealing as the idea is. He's had no trouble sleeping around Jonathan or Nancy on the couple random occasions it's just happened -- and he kinda likes the idea of curling up to drift off with one of

them nearby on *purpose*. But Steve also isn't that delusional. He knows that can't happen. It's just now how adult relationships work. He's not dating Nancy, and he's barely friends with Jonathan and kind of too old for sleepovers. Besides -- wouldn't it be weird to want something like that out of a friend anyway?

The thought makes Steve's chest tight, his breathing shallow.

"Why not?"

Steve sighs, taking a corner a little too hard in annoyance. "It's just weird, alright? It's not normal."

"Normal? *Normal!*? Come *on*, Steve!" Dustin practically shouts, his voice suddenly too loud for the inside of Steve's car. "When has anything that ever happened in this town been *normal*?"

Steve opens his mouth to argue, but he can't find any words, so he closes it again. Dustin's right: nothing that has happened even remotely qualifies as normal

"I guess you're right," he says.

"So, you'll do it?" Dustin asks.

"It's not that easy, Henderson. I can't just *ask* that kind of thing. '*Hey, can I sleep with you?*' Yeah, no. Not happening."

Dustin makes an annoyed noise. "It totally *is* that easy. You're just making it all complicated and stuff."

"I'm not making it '*complicated and stuff*'."

"You totally are, but okay. Have fun not sleeping, loser," Dustin says, climbing out of Steve's car after Steve pulls up in front of Dustin's house. Right before he closes the door, Dustin pokes his head back in and says, "Just think about it, alright?"

He refuses to close the door until Steve mumbles out a reluctant 'yes.'

--

There's something to be said for the kind of courage you only get at midnight when you haven't slept in three days.

It's the kind of courage that has Steve rolling up a couple houses down from the Wheelers' at twelve-thirty in the morning and throwing his car into park. It's cold, but at least it's not snowing, which means that Steve's drive over wasn't as treacherous as it could've been for his sleep-deprived self. It also means that Steve isn't totally miserable standing on their perfectly manicured lawn in the middle of the night -- just a little chilly.

A few months ago, Steve would've been scaling Nancy's roof and tapping at her window with a grin. Now, he's throwing rocks for attention like some lovesick teenage loser.

After a few minutes, Nancy's curtains open and Steve spots her incredulous face peering down at him from a mostly-dark room. She pries the window open and makes a face at the wall of cold air that hits her. "*Steve?*" she mouths, looking down at him like he's some kind of dream. Her eyes are only partially open, which means Steve woke her up. A little bit of guilt gnaws at his bottom ribs, but he pushes it back, ignores it for now.

She looks so beautiful, even sleep-rumpled and confused.

"Can I come up?" Steve whispers as loud as he can.

Nancy is still for a moment, then nods.

When Steve stumbles through her window with a bit more grace than the first time he made this trip, Nancy is sitting on her bed with the comforter around her shoulders. Her bedside lamp is on and dim, painting her angles in the soft orange glow of its light. She looks like a dream, a fatigue-drunk fantasy. Quickly, Steve closes the window to keep in the rest of the warm air from escaping.

"Steve, what are you doing here?" She looks more awake now, her dark eyes focused on him like spotlights, searching him for answers she figures he won't give up.

He thinks about making a joke, picturing the beautiful back-and-forth

that could play out between the two of them. But after a while, Nancy would get annoyed at his avoidance and Steve would lose the courage he had only moments ago. Even now, he can feel it draining out of his bones, replaced by weary exhaustion.

So, instead, Steve says: "I'm tired, Nance."

Nancy smiles, but in a sad sort of way. "I know."

Steve runs a hand through his hair. It's still cold from outside. Steve doesn't feel cold, though. He doesn't feel much of anything at all right now, other than tired. And maybe a little awestruck and unbalanced by the picture of Nancy so soft, so touchable, so close. "Look, I was just wondering if --"

Nancy pats the bed next to her with a gentle hand. "Come here, Steve."

Steve falters. Sure, this was what he wanted, what he came here for, but it seems way too easy. Too simple. Nothing is *ever* easy, not for Steve, not anymore. Before all this, everything in his life slid easily and perfectly into place. Now, it's all a jumbled puzzle, with jagged, broken edges and all the wrong pieces.

He sits on the bed next to her still, feet taking him there without thought. The bed dips under his weight and suddenly Nancy is right there next to him, warm, draping the other side of the comforter over his shoulders, too.

It's so easy he wants to cry.

A long breath escapes him, unbidden, and he lets himself rest his head on her shoulder. Steve doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't say anything at all.

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington," Nancy says fondly, after she's locked her door, after he's slipped off his shoes and crawled into bed beside her.

She presses a kiss to his cheek and Steve doesn't even remember falling asleep in the warm moments that follow.

Author's Note:

thanks for reading & stay tuned for more. let me know what you think!

you can find me on [tumblr](#), if you are so inclined.